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ABSTRACT

A major problem in many composition classes is the unwillingness of the instructor to relinquish control in the classroom. Because students are excluded from having control in the classroom and control over their own writing, they become disenchanted with the processes of learning and discovery and the power those processes create. Students should be encouraged to develop their thinking and writing skills. A current misconception holds that instead of using their freedom constructively, students will develop a carefree, undisciplined attitude. However, that possibility can be minimized when students are encouraged to express meaning and make discoveries in their writing. Teachers must take responsibility for developing their students' abilities and adopt a noninterventionist teaching approach. Classroom lecture should be reduced and teachers should talk with students instead of at them. In addition, students should be provided with opportunities to learn from each other and occasionally be allowed to take the role of teacher. The teaching of composition demands a democracy in the classroom that is necessary for students' growth in writing, reading, thinking, and learning. (DF)

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Empowering the Powerless: Authority in the Writing Classroom

I begin my talk this morning by asking you to follow me through three scenarios:

1) From a Composition 101 syllabus: "English Composition will teach you the techniques of writing and critical thought. Weekly writing assignments, several of which will be done out of class, will be required. Students will be expected to strengthen their vocabularies through the study of unfamiliar words and to read more critically by the end of the course."

2) From another Composition 101 syllabus: "In this course, your writing will be expected to demonstrate much consideration and thought, attention to details, support, logic, all in an organized format. Conventional use of mechanics and usage is expected. I will review your rough drafts. Because revision is an important part of the writing process, you must revise the drafts I read to get credit for the papers. Revisions are due two class days after I have returned the rough draft."

3) And finally from a third Composition 101 syllabus: "The focus of this course will be students' writing. Because good writing involves discovery of what you have to say about a topic, you will be expected to explore such discovery in all the papers you write this semester. Ten papers are expected: description, narration, definition, illustration, comparison-contrast, classification-division, cause-effect, process analysis, persuasion, and argumentation."

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I cite these three (although I could have chosen others) because they represent many syllabi, and are indicative of what is happening in too many composition classes these days. The first is an example of a course in which writing is not emphasized, despite its being designated a composition course; rather "techniques of writing," critical thinking and reading, and vocabulary building are the principal features of the course. The second is a course in which revision is emphasized as an important part of the writing process, but students are given only two days to revise their papers. In the third example, discovery in writing is deemed important, but the discovery is according to the teacher's prescribed formulas; that is, students are given forms or rhetorical modes in which to fill in their discoveries, and ten papers to boot.

I suspect that such scenarios are evidence of the merging of old and new pedagogies, what happens when old constraints of thinking about and teaching writing confront new understandings of how strong, meaningful, and compelling prose happens. While they are perhaps interested in new pedagogies and even willing/eager to incorporate such thinking into their classes, abandoning the old remains risky business for many instructors. Any change in thinking about composition and its teaching involves loss, and losing something that is comfortable and familiar--much like giving up a habit or throwing out an old pair of shoes--is disconcerting. And these <u>are</u> changing times. Hence, it is not unusual to find instructors straddling two worlds, emphasizing the importance of, say, revision but

distrustful enough of it to give students only a day or so to revise their papers. Or instructors who have read that writing is discovery but insist on giving students set parameters in which to discover what they have to say. Or instructors who believe that writing should be the focus of a composition course, yet address vocabulary and reading more than writing in their courses. This half-hearted pedagogy sends out contradictory messages to students: while professing one thing, instructors' actions belie their rhetoric. Confusion, obviously, is the outcome: students are unsure of what writing is all about, and instructors are dismayed when nothing works in their classes.

I also suspect that such scenarios result when instructors lack coherent understanding of the writing process. Such instructors have jumped on the bandwagon called the process approach without thoroughly understanding its theoretical underpinnings. Thus, we find instructors professing the importance of, say, writing as discovery but giving nothing more than lipservice to it. [I might add that I use "lipservice" intentionally. When there is more talk about writing than actual practice in writing, there's something awfully suspicious going on in the classroom. I was painfully reminded of this when I read a brochure from a publisher. The front cover sported a turn of the century picture of a class--presumably a composition class--in which students (male) were stationed at bolted-down desks and the teacher was looking over one student. The bold printing on the bottom of the page read, "Are your students <u>reading</u> more about writing than writing?" I was delighted by the

cover, but dismayed--no, disappointed/outraged--when I turned the page to see three composition texts advertised, one running 300 pages, another 400, and the last a whopping 700.]

While one group of instructors does not totally believe in the new pedagogy and another does not fully understand it--although the two groups may overlap--I think there is evidence of a larger problem. That problem is an unwillingness for the instructor to give up control in the classroom. Many instructors remain convinced that one person in the classroom has the "answers." After all, instructors have their degrees and initials behind their names, and teachers are teachers, students are students. While the instructors purport to have the knowledge or the answers, the students' task is to search out those answers until the instructor's truth is found. I see this as the most dangerous of all phenomena in the composition classroom.

Because students are excluded from having control in the classroom--control over their own writing--they become second-class citizens, observers rather than participants, people who ultimately become disenfranchised from their own learning, discovery, and from the power created by learning and discovery.

In a 1972 article entitled "Teaching Language in Open Admissions," Adrienne Rich reflects on this issue of power in the classroom. She writes, "I think of myself as a teacher of language: that is, as someone for whom language has implied freedom, who is trying to aid others to free themselves through the written word, and above all though learning to write it for

themselves. I cannot know for them what it is they need to free, or what words they need to write. I can only try with them to get an approximation of the story they want to tell...my daily life confronts me with young men and women who have had language and literature used against them, to keep them in their place, to mystify, to bully, to make them feel powerless." (63)

Rich was writing from her experience with SEEK program at City College of New York, a program for black and Puerto Rican freshmen entering college from ghetto high schools where the prevailing assumption had been that the students were intellectually inferior. When we speak of students who have had language used against them, language an act of oppression, I think we are referring to more than basic writers, minorities of black, Chicano, American Indian, Southeast Asian, or women. Rather we need to start thinking of all students as victims of oppression when they have never been given the opportunity to write--freely and openly--without some restrictions being placed on them, restrictions which served to conceal more than reveal what they had to say, preventing/blocking them from telling their story.

Jerome Bruner, in his talk entitled "The Language of Education," delivered at the Conference on English Education, addressed this very issue. He spoke of the "negotiatory or...transactional view (having) deep and direct implications for the conduct of education." He went on to say that, "The way in which we talk to our students makes it sound as if the world were

completed, finished...so settled, far less hypothetical, far less negotiatory, and therefore...more boring." (149-150)

Mina Shaughnessy, then director of the Basic Writing Program at City College, summed it up best when she wrote, "education has failed for too many students." (61) Although Shaughnessy was referring to open admissions and basic writing programs, her words I think adequately reflect many of the prevailing attitudes regarding composition as a whole enterprise. Disbelievers need only consider all the times they have heard students bemoaning, criticizing, or simply not understanding their composition classes. Such students have bought into myths to explain or rationalize their failure in composition classes: how many times have we heard students say "some are born with the ability to write and others aren't"; "I wasn't able to guess what the teacher really wanted"; "I never was able to write well because I need to re-do my work over and over"; "my paper wasn't good because I just wasn't inspired to write--never was zapped by lightning." Granted, some students use these excuses as a way to avoid a considerable amount of work. However, some students actually <u>believe</u> such misconceptions about writing. I contend they had to learn them from someone, and I suspect that some of their previous teachers aided in perpetuating such thinking about composition.

Any discussion of the disenfranchisement of students calls up the work of Paolo Friere. In an interview with Rex Davis for RISK, Friere claimed that education is for one of two purposes: humanization, a liberating force; or domestication, a dominating

one. He went on to state that "Knowledge is a process. But what does the school mean? It is a house where the students are invited to assume a passive attitude in order to receive the transference of the existing knowledge without reflection on the very possibility of the creation of this knowledge...a school itself builds the alienation of us, in us, precisely because the task of schools--in a wrong way...in a wrong perception--is to transfer to the students the existing knowledge." (66)

If writing is a meaning-making activity, a way of knowing an act of discovery, it is the students' meaning that is in the making, the students' discovery that is evolving--not the teacher's preconceived notion of what the students should be saying or discovering. Instead of the teacher telling students her truth, the students should be allowed--no, encouraged--to find theirs. This would help in ending the mere transference of existing knowledge from teacher to students, as Friere put it. It would also help bring composition classes closer to the notion expressed in the 1984 NCTE Commission on Composition's position statement: "Writing is a powerful instrument of thought. In the act of composing, writers learn about themselves and their worlds and communicate their insights to others. Writing confers the power to grow personally and to effect change in the world."

What is happening here is a new understanding and implementation of responsibilities in the composition class. The often-heard misconception is that when offered freedom students are given license for a free-wheeling, anything-goes format. Not so. Because students are encouraged to write to find meaning

and to hunker up against discovery, they have tremendous responsibilities--more challenging and more important ones than if they were simply to take notes, regurgitate them, second-guess the teacher on what she wants in a paper, and produce bland, generic representations of the obvious. Students rather are responsible for becoming vibrant, active writers, readers, and critics of writing: people who, as the NCTE statement reminds us, "learn about themselves and their worlds" through the act of writing. And this active writing enables them to "grow personally and to effect change in the world." Writing is a powerful tool, but that power needs to be made real and accessible, and it can be powerful to and for students only if they use it. The old rhetoric/pedagogy, on the other hand, fails because it simply is not a powerful learning tool. More often than not, it and its product are rehearsed lies.

The teachers' responsibilities to set into motion the dynamicism and power evoked by writing are just as awesome. For teachers to rile against the mere transference of knowledge means that they must abandon their notions of teacher as all-consuming authority in the classroom. Abandoning authority means giving up an ego that leads some teachers to believe that they are the only ones who have all the answers, and if not <u>all</u> the answers, then certainly the right ones, the ones that matter. [It occurs to me that teachers cannot "confer the power for students to write, grow personally, and effect change in the world." It is something that students already possess. Years ago Chomsky taught us that children are not linguistically empty vessels

which need to be filled with rules, structures, and patterns. Students already possess those materials. They need to be assured that they have them and they are worthy, dependable ones at that. The same holds true for writing.

When abandoning the all-consuming place in the classroom, teachers become a part of non-interventionist teaching. This non-interventionist stance translates into classes where teachers abandon the lecture as the primary classroom activity and talk with students, not at them. Non-interventionist teaching also subsumes collaborative learning as the underlying theme of the class, where students are given the opportunity to learn from each other, and in so doing assume the role of teacher as well as writer. Besides, to truly write is to teach oneself. In all of this, I am describing composition classes that reflect the characteristics often found in poetry, fiction, and play writing workshops: workshops in which the teacher provides the occasion for students to look closely at and discuss each other's work. And the teacher is but one part of the community of writers, readers, thinkers, and learners.

Returning briefly to Bruner, we learn that "The most important thing one can do in teaching and in preparing curriculum materials...is somehow to remember that the stance in which (the teacher) present(s) it...is essentially...going to be the first way in which (students) sense (how to) use their minds about it." (150)

For those instructors who provide such syllabi as I excerpted and read at the beginning of my talk continue to be

skeptical of current thinking in composition theory and of research--work that has in my mind proven the credibility of non-interventionist teaching/learning--I ask them to consider the larger, broader implications of my remarks this morning. I am urging consideration and support of new reasons for what we do in the Composition classroom, an approach that is supported by rich and compelling research in the field, as well as an inquiry into our role as teachers. The teaching of composition asks us to question previously held beliefs about teacher and student. Much like the changing canon in literature, it encourages, if not demands, a democracy in the classroom, a democracy that is necessary for students' growth in writing, reading, thinking, and learning. In all of this, I am reminded of Richard Ohmann's last line in his November 1985 article in College English: "The only way to have a democracy is to make one." That is the charge for composition teachers. And that is one of ~~the~~ surest routes to lead us to achieving the title of this session, "The Power of Mastery Over the Written Word." The stakes are high, but so are the rewards. If we do not assume such a stance, we will have forfeited much of what twenty years of research has offered us. We will have also lost the chance to help our students become all that they can as writers, readers, thinkers, and learners. Our students deserve better.

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